

glowing cigar to the dancer's protruding bun.

Flesh sizzled.

Sheila leaped, and almost surely would have broken the world's long-jump record had her spread-eagled flight not been stopped short by Ellis.

Her crotch, with its little red triangle of cloth, hit his face with a thud. Her legs fell over his shoulders and her flight came to a halt. The stool tilted backwards, hanging for a second at a forty-five degree angle as she windmilled her arms, scooping air like a back-stroking swimmer.

A flash-bulb went off and Clete yelled, "GOT IT!" Then the stool and Ellis and Sheila fell.

Ellis stood up with a bloody nose. Sheila stood up mad, with a cherry-red blister on her butt the size of a fifty-cent piece. She charged at Clete, with the intention of killing him. He dropped his camera and his cigar and sprinted out the door. The naked woman with his brand on her backside followed him. Ruth picked up the camera and tore the film out. Juanita, Clete's wife and the party's hostess, picked up the cigar and dropped it in the garbage disposal. The guys gathered around Ellis, calling him an old goat, slapping his back, and asking him what it was like, that brief encounter.

RUTH AND ELLIS CELEBRATE VALENTINE'S DAY

Ellis bought Ruth a candy-filled red heart the size of a trash-can lid and Ruth set an especially nice table, with flowers and crystal wine glasses. Ellis poured the champagne and said, "To us," raising his glass. After three more glasses, he ducked under the table and snatched his wife's shoe from her foot.

"Ellis, don't," she said. "You can't drink champagne from a slipper."

He fixed her with a romantic gaze and said, "Watch me."

Ruth turned away and said, "Oh gross."

Ellis poured and drank. The slipper's soft fabric soaked up most of the bubbly but Ellis got a mouthful, along with an old corn cushion.

He choked on it.

Ruth jumped up and pounded his back. The rubber dot shot out of his esophagus like a bullet and stuck to the glass on the china cabinet. Ellis leaned on the table and gasped, "What the hell are you tryin' to do, kill me?"

"You're the idiot that wanted to drink out of my slipper," said Ruth.

"Yeah," said Ellis, "And you're the one that didn't warn me that it was loaded."

Ruth was too mad to answer, so she smashed the heart-shaped box over his head. He wore it around his neck like a yoke as he crawled along the rug on his hands and knees, gathering the scattered candy.

BETTY GETS HIRED ON

The management at the Loma Alta Cafe, in a break from their tradition of hiring late-twenties, early-thirties divorced women as waitresses, took on Betty, a short, dumpy, post-retirement girl with an ink-black bouffant, a million dirty jokes, a laugh like a donkey, and a pair of short, shapeless legs that looked absolutely ridiculous in the short-skirted uniform.

The other girls laughed at her behind her back, calling her 'Sexpot' with a roll of the eye. But the old girl could move around the tables, and she even made the cook blush (something that was thought impossible since Bill was considered by everyone who knew him as the most disgustingly demented human being on the face of the earth) when she gave him a hard and unexpected goose to, "Hurry that idiot up on my short stack he's been sittin' on."

She was even earning a little grudging respect with the amount of tip money she was pulling in, until she went too far by sitting on the lap of one of the regulars and sticking her tongue in his ear. Some things were just considered unfair tactics.

They decided to have a word with her, before things got out of hand. If this didn't get nipped in the bud, the next thing you know she'd be running around topless.

So when Betty stepped back by the coffee machine to suck up a cigarette, Delores came up to her and said, "Don't you think it's a little ... undignified, shall we say, sitting on a customer's lap, Honey, an old girl like you?"

Betty squinted at her through the smoke she was blowing,